

BUCKSAR, Richard G.

TIMMINS, THE PORCUPINE & GOLD

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# TIMMINS, THE PORCUPINE & GOLD

by Richard G. Bucksar

Since pre-Confederation days Canada's mines have been major contributors to her prosperity. Iron, copper, lead, nickel, uranium, silver, gold, and other minerals exist in immense quantities. However, difficulties in transporting, mining and smelting the ore, coupled with the rigours of climate and topography, plus a general ignorance and apathy among investors combined to prevent much progress before the turn of the twentieth century.

Historians record that British Columbia shared in the advance brought on by the California gold rush of the 1850's, its placer deposits being worked to the recovery of nearly 50 million dollars. During the boom, Community names were added to the map and legends were born. Although many camps disappeared, the great ones provided much of the technical know-how which would aid later mining developments. The camps became the traditional starting points or bases for exploration and often grew to be regional centres of economic development.

During this period, quantities of gold were recovered, but the surface had barely been skimmed. Nova Scotia for many years kept up a small, but steady production of gold and coal. Ontario, a latecomer to the precious metals race, measured its early wealth only in the production of salt and petroleum. Too few had faith in the economic potential of the Canadian Northland. It was necessary to instill that faith and further to stir the imagination. One thing accomplished both — the discovery of more gold.

Gold has shared the responsibility with fur and religion for serving as a major stimulus for exploration, colonisation, and development on the North American continent. Throughout the centuries, gold has been universally accepted as a medium of exchange between men.

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*Above: Prospectors with their cabins at Porcupine's Gold Camp. Photo taken in 1910.*

*Right: Mining Recorder's office at Golden City.*



Perhaps the greatest administrative contribution to the country's growing economy was an improving transportation system. Sir John A. MacDonald had tried, during his administration, to unite the several regions of Canada in hopes of expanding mining, agriculture, and the forest industries. At the time of the discoveries in the Cariboo (1873) only scattered railway lines existed, some completed, some under construction. They lacked the bond of union or practical efficiency. As the transcontinental lines were completed at the beginning of the twentieth century, thoughts were given to extending spur lines into the Northland in hopes of attracting agricultural settlement. The Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway was purposely established as such a "colonisation" route.

The primary thought of agricultural settlement received a set back, when, in the vicinity of Mile 104, silver was discovered. This led to the Cobalt rush. Although these silver deposits were discovered by chance, it was no accident that trained men were available to mine them and this labour force became one of Canada's greatest assets and contributions of the period.

But although previous discoveries had been fantastic and the riches huge, the greatest Ontario gold field, those of the Porcupine, remained undiscovered.

The gold discoveries of the Porcupine are closely related to the silver find at Cobalt. The silver discovery attracted prospectors, pseudo-adventurers, miners, and others from around the world, and it accelerated the building of the railway. Since surveying is a necessity to the construction of any railway, it was only a matter of time before the area to the west and the north of Cobalt was explored.

Many tales are told of the original Porcupine strike and numerous groups and individuals are credited with its discovery. One party, led by Jack Wilson, had a permanent camp near Cobalt. Mrs. Wilson kept house assisted by one or two swampers. One of Wilson's workers, a George Bannerman, was detailed to remain in camp as a helper during a forthcoming tour but, because of a personality clash with Mrs. Wilson, was allowed to go along with the group as camp cook.

The party went to the end-of-steel near, what is to-day, Matheson. From there they travelled by canoe to an area west of Nighthawk Lake and set up a base of operations.

After about a month without any results, the party decided to go back to Cobalt. Camp duties during this time had denied George the opportunity to do any prospecting, so he requested a day in the field. Since the following day was Sunday and there would be no activity in the field by the party, Wilson agreed to the request.

George rose early, prepared a meal for the camp, shouldered a pack and walked into the bush. He was away all day and the group became concerned when evening came and he had still not returned. Finally, sometime after 10 p.m. he staggered into the camp weighed down with pure gold nuggets.

Evidently, while resting in the afternoon he had accidentally scraped some moss from a large rock and there "like fingers reaching to the heavens" he found gold. The group could not wait until the morning but rushed out at once to view George's discovery.

The claim was filed within several months and the rush was on. Nature supplied the resource, Cobalt supplied the man-power, and soon the towns of the Porcupine emerged.



One of four towns which developed to serve the gold-producing Porcupine area was Timmins. The others of lesser importance were Schumacher, Porcupine, and South Porcupine. The four towns now occupy a twelve mile strip of land, containing the major gold producing mines of the area.

By 1910, the railway reached Kelso, and it then became the gateway to the Porcupine. Early conditions were primitive and transportation over the intervening thirty miles difficult. It was necessary in this period to follow the water and portage routes through much bog and muskeg. The majority of the travellers of this route were hardy, well-trained prospectors and miners. Even during the earliest days, families trudged behind their men, carried their share of the load and responsibility and laid the foundations of the early towns.

These prospectors and their families took an active part in community development. They helped to blaze trails, haul supplies and equipment, and to organize the first businesses. It is no wonder that the early pioneers of the Porcupine referred to all latecomers as "Pullman car pioneers."



*Main Street, Porcupine City - an early photograph*

As the population grew from a mere handful of prospectors, it became necessary to develop townsites, community centres, and businesses. Although the first settlements at best, could only be described as a rude collection of shacks, they quickly developed character. Under the circumstances, the Porcupine could be judged as being quite 'civilized', and by late 1910 had settled down to be an average northern community.

On 11 July 1911, the entire townsite was destroyed by fire. Fortunately, the future of the area was becoming evident, and the rude collection of shacks gave way to a somewhat better planned community. Although rebuilt in a more substantial manner, it remained, for many years, an obvious mining community. It suffered long from the general fear of the "five-year-phobia" that mining communities are short-lived, and with that possibility, few cared to invest in permanent structures or civic improvements.

No other metal has been so acceptable or so widely sought. The discovery of vast quantities of this precious metal in a youthful, non-industrial nation had far-reaching consequences.

In 1894, the total gold production for Canada was valued at \$1.1 million, an amount that was almost unchanged over some twenty years. In 1896, production was valued at \$2.8 million, in the next year over \$6 million, in 1898 it was \$13 million, and by 1899 over \$21 million. The main cause for the rapid expansion during this period was the discovery of gold in the Klondike. Between the years 1897-1904, it is estimated that over \$100 million in gold was recovered from the Yukon's placer deposits alone.

The lure of gold was great. Thousands of rural and urban dwellers gave up the security of home and job, joined in the search, and soon discovered other mining areas. Gold was discovered in the Lake-of-the-Woods area, silver at Cobalt and more gold at Kootenay. With continued findings, the Canadian mining interests grew and stimulated increased feeling toward northern and western frontier areas.

The "new" Timmins was laid out for development under the auspices of the Timmins Townsite Company. Principally responsible for the new foundations was Noah Timmins, the major shareholder in the Hollinger Mine. He planned the location, laid out the town pattern, put the land up for sale, and finally, bestowed his name upon the community. The first lots were sold at public auction on Labour Day, 1911. The average lot sizes were 30 feet by 90 feet and ranged in price from \$5.00 to \$10.00 for residential lots, and from \$75.00 to \$1,000.00 for thirty foot commercial lots.

To improve transportation facilities, the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway ran a branch line from Porquus Junction and established a terminal at Timmins. The completion of this railway led to the further development of the town, eventually linking it with Toronto. Permanent stores, such as Charles Pierce's general store, began to make their appearance and, as the great mines



of the area continued to show possibilities of productivity, large business buildings were erected. Timmins took on the look of a modern city.

During the period 1914-18, over 1,000 men enlisted in the armed forces. Upon their return they brought new ideas from the "outside" and helped to promote schools, hospitals, and other civic organizations. As the population became more permanent, people found that Timmins was as appealing and as comfortable as any Canadian city. Those who came to the area without intention of staying began to build permanent homes.

Between 1921 and 1933, the townsite was enlarged by annexing lands from the surrounding area. There were six different annexations during this period: three from Tisdale Township, two from Mountjoy Township, and one annexation from both townships.

The Depression years had a strange effect upon Timmins. The continued demand for gold meant employment and steady wages. Depression prices throughout Canada were accordingly lower, but gold prices and miner's wages remained at pre-depression levels. As a result, the unemployed flocked to Timmins creating severe population problems.

During the decade 1931-41, the population of Timmins doubled. Further annexation in 1937 of portions of Mountjoy and Tisdale Townships became necessary in order to accommodate the growing population. Since that time, growth in the area has been slight.

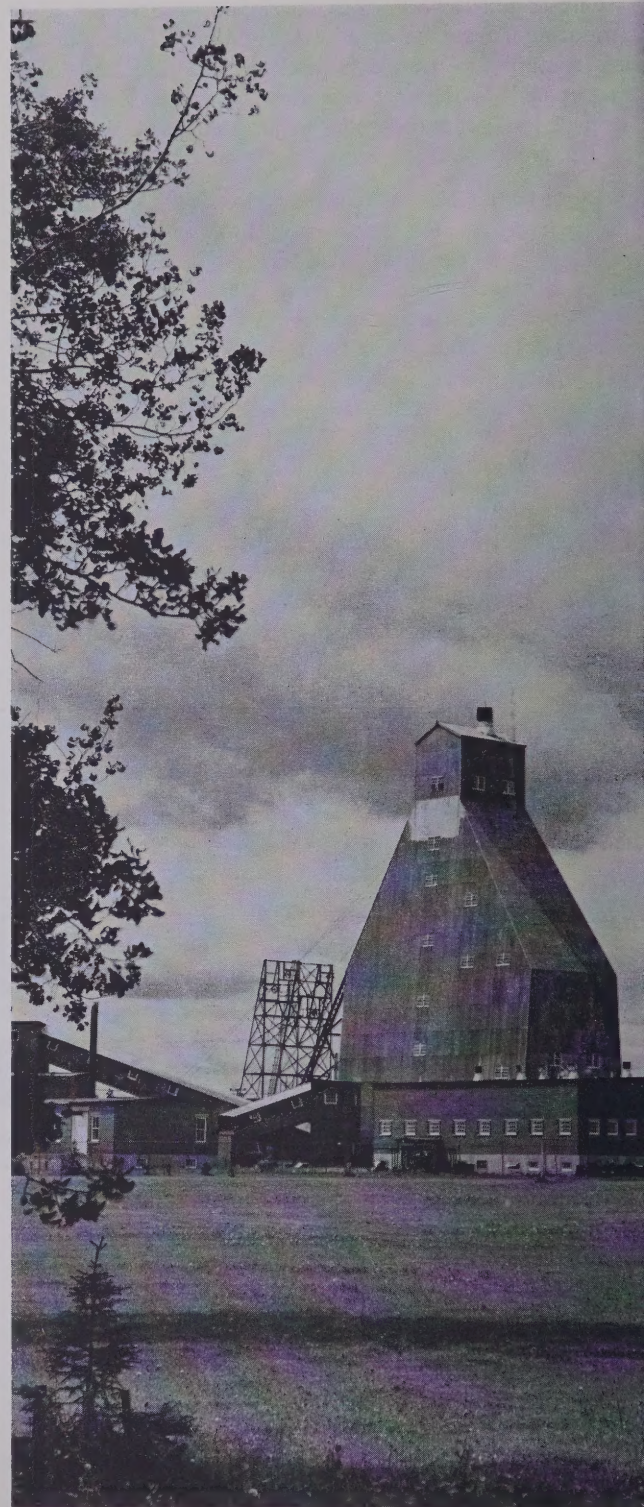
#### POPULATION — TIMMINS

1912	600	1951	27,743
1914	935	1956	27,551
1921	3,843	1959	28,325
1931	14,200	1966	28,500
1941	28,790	1969 (Jan. 1)	28,900

Between 1954 and 1962 there was a general decline in the mine labour force (6,181 in 1954 to 5,869 in 1962). This has also resulted in a decline of natural population increase. Between 1950 and 1962 the average annual increase was 1.04% as compared to 3.05% for the Province and 2.6% for the nation.

The fluctuation in population has been due to a number of factors. The large growth, 1931-41, was primarily caused by the Depression influx. The decrease, 1941-51, was due to World War II. Many volunteered for service in the Forces. But military service, as such, had little total effect upon the population. The greatest single wartime difficulty was the restraint placed on gold mining by a shortage of man-power and materials. These had been shifted into other more vital industrial efforts.

Following the war, the population slump continued owing to the rising cost of mining operations. In spite of this, there were three additional annexations to the town between 1945 and 1948.



*Head Frame, Pamour Mine near Timmins.*



At the end of 1948, there were fifteen producing mines in the Porcupine area. They employed a total of nearly seven thousand workers with a gross payroll of some \$12 million annually. Although the other three towns shared with Timmins the responsibility of serving the Porcupine, Timmins dominated the region economically and received most of the business revenues.

The single most important problem to the gold mining industry and the area in general has been the price-setting of gold. The growth of the town up to 1933-34 was rapid, as development was related to the world gold standard. Even after the abandonment of the gold standard by the leading nations of the world, these same nations relied heavily upon gold to help support international trade. Thus the producers were assured a steady market at a good price. The price per ounce has remained at \$35.00 (U.S.) since 1934 when it was pegged at

The over-dependence upon a single extractive industry was beginning to have its effect. The mining of gold was the major support of Timmins and the adjoining towns. Although other activities were sought after by forward-looking persons, new industries and economic endeavours simply did not materialize. Relief was needed for the failing mining industry, but it simply did not come. Timmins was ripe for a disaster.

Disaster came in a strange form. In early April of 1964, premature announcements of a fabulous copper strike aroused the North. The events which followed are now history. Highly speculative stocks rose from pennies to dollars in value and then tumbled. Too many felt that the town was overdue for a "break," gambled, and lost.

To-day, several properties are now being developed without the mass hysteria of 1964 and the speculative buying which followed. Estimates are far more conser-



Ontario Dept. Travel & Publicity

*The Business section, Timmins, Ontario.*

that figure by the United States Government (prior to 1934, the price had been \$20.64). This obvious increase resulted in boom conditions in Timmins at a time when the rest of North America was in a state of economic chaos.

In the thirty odd years since the price fixing, the cost of producing gold has more than doubled. The fixed United States price, in the face of rising costs, has forced the closure of many Canadian gold mines. Nine mines in the Porcupine have ceased operations in recent years.

In partial solution to the problem, the industry stepped up its introduction of significant technical improvements. New mining methods helped to offset the squeeze by reducing operational costs, but they still did not offer a complete solution to the problem.

vative than in the past, but the work is continuing. The general employment picture seems to indicate labour stability. However, indications of labour problems have become more evident as winter progresses and construction comes to a halt. There are few opportunities for alternate employment in the area at the present time.

The present mining development seems to inspire optimism. Although the officials of Texas Gulf have refused to discuss ore reserves, they have predicted that the present open pit site will be a producer for roughly twenty years. They further predict that the mine is expected to be a major underground producer after that time.

The Kidd Creek Mine, about 15 miles from Timmins, is an open pit, 2,500 feet long by about 1,600 feet across, and is currently about 200 feet deep. The current pro-



duction totals 45,000 tons per day, of which 12,000 tons are ore, and the remainder waste rock. The present working situation dictates three shifts per day, five days per week with an extra shift on Sunday to keep the fine-ore bins up.

The ore is hauled about three quarters of a mile to the crushing plant where the waste is separated and hauled to a tailings area. About fifteen miles southeast of the mine is the concentrator mill. The two sites are joined by a new rail line, which is used to haul six 18 car trains to the concentrator each day. As of 31 August 1968, approximately 32 million tons of material involving 5,829,000 tons of ore have been removed since the mine started operations on 1 January 1965.

In spite of the extreme optimism caused by the new developments in the area, the main problem still exists. Timmins and the adjoining area have become over-engaged in extractive industries. Continued finds in copper and other base materials may aid the town for a considerable period of time, but industry must be diversified if the community is to continue. At present, several additional mining concerns, including INCO, are investigating the area in search of other minerals; but no plans for industrial variety are being considered.

Today, the Cochrane District, has a total area of 52,237 square miles and contains a population of roughly 96,000. In addition to Timmins, the largest urban centre, the District consists of six towns and nine incorporated townships. Due to the limited population of the area, there seems to be much duplication of services. Apparently, it will only be a matter of time before it will be necessary to join the several parts of the community into a single entity.

Timmins is at present a part of the Porcupine Planning Area which, in addition to the town, extends over the townships of Jessop, Murphy, Hoyle, Mountjoy, Tisdale, Whitney, Ogden, Deloro, and Shaw. The proposed new planning area would include the surrounding twenty-one unorganized townships for a total area of approximately 900 square miles, as opposed to the 324 in the present planning area. If this unification takes place, and a single community emerges, the new "Timmins-Porcupine" should certainly be in a better position to assume the leadership of the region.

Because of Timmins and the Porcupine, Canada ranks third in world gold output with an annual production of some 4.5 million ounces. The remaining six producing mines have an annual production of nearly one million ounces, representing approximately twenty-five per cent of Canada's production and nearly half the production of Ontario. The mines of the area have mined and milled nearly 125 million tons of gold ore in the fifty years of production and they have produced innovations in mining technology which have been used in mining throughout the world.

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